



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE PROBLEM OF NATURAL EVIL AND ITS SOLUTION BY CHRISTIANITY

HENRY W. WRIGHT, PH.D.
Lake Forest University, Lake Forest, Ill.

A distinguished writer on philosophical subjects has lately defined religion as "an emotion resting on a conviction of a harmony between ourselves and the universe at large."¹ While this definition gives undue prominence to emotion it has the merit of emphasizing also the most important element in religious belief—faith in the ultimate unity and essential purposiveness of the world of human experience. There is a growing tendency among thinkers of the present to base belief in God on the final unity of all things as presupposed by our thought. It is not surprising that an idealist like Dr. Edward Caird should identify God with the absolute principle of unity "which transcends all the oppositions of finitude and especially the last opposition which includes all others—the opposition of subject and object."² But the conception of religion as belief in an ultimate harmony between self and reality seems acceptable to pragmatist and empiricist as well. Professor James says that Höfding's definition of religion as belief in the ultimate conservation of values seems to him to cover more facts in the concrete history of human religions than any other definition with which he is acquainted.³ Yet what does such belief in the "conservation of values" mean if not faith that the objects of human endeavor and aspiration are somehow preserved and provided for in the nature of reality—in short that there is final harmony between ourselves and the universe?

Taking this view of religion, we can easily understand why it has always found a problem of extreme difficulty in the existence of natural evil. For where religion postulates unity, ultimate and transcending, natural evil discloses difference, deep-rooted and thorough-

¹ McTaggart, *Some Dogmas of Religion*, p. 3.

² Caird, *Evolution of Religion*, Vol. I, p. 67.

³ Höfding, *Problems of Philosophy*, Preface by William James, p. xiii.

going. Religion assumes the existence of a harmony between human aspirations and the universal order. Natural evil reveals the presence of a conflict between man's interests and the course of nature. The average person has proof enough from his own experience that the forces of nature are not adjusted to the needs of man. If he has not been himself the innocent victim of disease or disaster, fire or flood, he knows of many who have and how great have been their sufferings. How can such facts be reconciled with the control of the world by a kind and merciful Providence? Is it reasonable to assume the existence of divine harmony and the presence of divine purpose when the facts show thorough maladjustment, radical opposition, and open conflict?

We may be accused, however, of exaggerating the difficulty of the problem which the prevalence of natural evil has set for religion to solve. If one looks not at the life of the individual but at the history of the race, he will see—we are told—that the regular operation of natural law is an indispensable condition of human progress. The forces of nature are ruthless because uniform, and it is this very uniformity which enables man to foresee their action and provide for his own safety and comfort. Nature has been man's great educator, training him in prudence and self-reliance in the conduct of his affairs and encouraging him to art and invention in turning her forces to his service. These inestimable benefits would never have accrued to man if his safety had been miraculously guarded on every occasion.

While the assistance which these thoughts give us in solving the problem of natural evil is welcome, indeed, we are still bound to ask, has the crucial difficulty been removed? What of the individual who must suffer in order that the uniformity of nature shall be undisturbed? Suppose that his pain and death is the consequence of an arrangement which works great benefit to humanity during the ages of its evolution. He is not consulted as to the part he is doomed to play. What if his case is an object-lesson causing precautions to be taken which result in the saving of thousands of lives? His life is cut short; his opportunities are ended. The truth seems to be that while mankind may derive great good from the inexorable uniformity of nature this good is purchased at the expense of individuals

who suffer from this arrangement. The good of the whole is attained at the expense of the parts. The interest of the individual is at variance with the welfare of the race, and the individual is sacrificed. The difficulty persists, therefore; maladjustment and conflict seem inherent in the nature of the world.

Religion postulates ultimate unity, natural evil reveals actual conflict, in the world of human experience. How to reconcile unity with difference, harmony with conflict—this is the great problem of religion. So important is the problem that we may classify religions in a general way according to their attitude upon it and evaluate them by the measure of success they attain in its solution.

When we compare different forms of religion from this point of view, the first distinction which we are led to make is between those which take cognizance of the problem and those which do not. In his analysis of the religious consciousness, Professor James distinguishes these two as leading types.⁴ The latter, which takes no account of the problem set by the prevalence of evil in the world, he calls the religion of "healthy-mindedness." In this form of religion there is no difficulty in believing that life is good and that the world is controlled by a beneficent deity, because no notice is taken of the facts which contradict this assumption. Faith that all things unite to carry out the good purposes of God is preserved by ignoring the evidence of discord and maladjustment in the world.

Whatever the practical advantages of such healthy-mindedness in religion may be, it has little value as a solution for the problem of evil. This is so obvious that the matter may be dismissed with a few words. To be ignorant of a difficulty is not to have overcome it, and a problem is not solved when it is purposely avoided. Any solution attained by this method is both superficial and insecure—superficial because not based on any thorough or adequate knowledge of the problem, and insecure because bound to fall to the ground when brought face to face with the real difficulties of the case. Moreover, to one who is honest with himself intellectually, a faith will seem not worth having which is retained only by disregarding all facts that conflict with it. Professor James is right when he says that the opposite type of religious consciousness which is fully aware

⁴ Cf. James *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

of the depth and difficulty of the problem of evil, and which he somewhat inaptly terms the "morbid-minded," "ranges over the wider scale of experience and that its survey is the one that overlaps . . . because the evil facts . . . are a genuine portion of reality and they may be after all the best key to life's significance and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth."⁵

Let us turn, therefore, to those forms of religion which have at least intelligence enough to appreciate the problem and courage enough to face it. These religions acknowledge that there is something radically wrong with human life and the world of human experience. They propose a remedy, if it is only the surrender of personal existence. They are religions of salvation. Now if we admit that evil is a feature inherent in reality, that conflict and maladjustment are an inexpugnable element in the world, our thought may take either of two directions. Either we may believe that discord and conflict are too deep-rooted to allow of any final unity, that evil is too prevalent in the world to allow of the presence of any ultimate principle of goodness; or, while we admit the existence of irreconcilable difference in the world, we may still affirm the presence of transcending unity. The first is the extreme of pessimism and is exemplified in Buddhism. The second is an optimism rooted in pessimism and is illustrated by Christianity.

The example of Buddhism alone is enough to persuade one that the existence of natural evil is religion's most difficult problem. This great religion numbering among its adherents a large part of the earth's inhabitants is based upon the conclusion that personal existence is an evil, a thing to be escaped from. Human life is deemed an evil because of the ills which naturally beset it. According to the Buddhist scriptures it was knowledge of the prevalence of natural evil—of sickness, old age, and death—which led Gautama Buddha to abandon his life of pleasure, make the "great renunciation," and go forth a wanderer in search of a way of salvation. As a solution for the problem of evil Buddhism with its pessimistic view of life must be esteemed more highly than those shallow optimisms which, out of the satisfaction springing from fortunate circumstances and organic well-being, declare that all things are good.

⁵ Cf. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*.

But, in so far as it offers no remedy but the extinction of personality, it proposes no solution—only a surrender. Its many noble practices, designed to destroy the principle of self-will in human nature, become only means to a selfish end—the escape from life with its duties and opportunities.

Christianity remains, therefore, the one instance of a religion which recognizes that evil is an essential part of the world of our experience and yet dares to maintain the presence in this world of a Conquering Power of Goodness. Admitting the presence of discord and conflict it nevertheless affirms that harmony is being achieved. In and through the difference and opposition it finds unity still existing. In its historic significance Christianity is emphatically a religion of salvation. The salvation which it professes to bring is, moreover, not simply a release from evil, but a victory over it. Hence it has not only the merit of Buddhism in squarely facing the problem but also the advantage of offering a remedy which is not a surrender but a solution.

No one ever accused the Founder of Christianity of failure to appreciate the sorrows and hardships of human existence; for “in the life and death of Jesus the consciousness of suffering and evil not as a far-off subject of reflection but as an immediate and present experience is raised to the highest conceivable point of intensity.” He was aware to the fullest extent of the ills which beset man’s life and thwart his most cherished ambitions. Because of this knowledge he taught that selfish ends—wealth, pleasure, etc.—are not worth the seeking. For these natural goods are all transitory and deceptive. They are certain to be snatched away by calamity, disease, or death. Moreover, he did not promise his followers any exemption from the common lot of humanity in this respect. But he proposed to turn the hard necessity which compels man continually to sacrifice his own pleasure and ambition into a means to a higher good, a way of salvation. He even enjoined men voluntarily to surrender their individual interests. For only through such self-sacrifice, he asserted, could self-realization be attained. Only through the death of the old self with its narrow aims and selfish ambitions could the new and larger self be born. Thus the suffering and privation incident upon conflict and maladjustment in the natural life of

man might become a blessing in disguise. Through it man would gain entrance into a higher and wider life, the "life of spirit," in which the individual allies himself with universal goodness and takes as his aim the welfare of humanity.

On what grounds does Jesus assert the existence of a life which is fostered and strengthened by sorrow and privation? We are acquainted with the natural life of man. But we know that suffering has just the opposite effect upon this life. We all know how continued misfortune diminishes man's power of action, how hardship and disease sap his vital energies, and how death cuts short the duration of his existence. For what reason, then, are we to believe in the possibility of another life which is not weakened but strengthened by suffering? Jesus bases his teaching of such a higher life upon revelation which he makes of the nature of God—that suffering and self-sacrifice enter the life and being of God, as expressions of his infinite benevolence. This doctrine of a "suffering God," a "divine sacrifice for humanity," is the center and essence of historic Christianity. It is the secret of the appeal which the Christian gospel has made to the hearts of men in all ages.

To many minds the idea of a divine sacrifice is incomprehensible and absurd. To speak of a suffering or dying God seems a contradiction in terms. Doubtless we do encounter an insurmountable logical difficulty if we attempt to reconcile such manifestations of the divine nature with other attributes usually connected with God's infinity, such as his omnipotence or immutability. But do we follow a fruitful method when we attempt to conceive of the nature of God by combining different attributes according to the canons of logical consistency? If the unity of the divine personality is to be preserved, must we not accept some one aspect of the divine character as supreme and subordinate all other qualities to it? Thus, if we believe that moral perfection is the leading feature of God's character, we shall have to interpret all other attributes in the light of this perfection. Now the height of moral perfection, as we understand it, is manifest in love and benevolence. But benevolence finds most complete expression in suffering and self-sacrifice for cherished objects. Hence to deny to God the possibility of these experiences is, as Principal John Caird says in his profound discussion of this

subject, to deny to him the highest moral excellence in all human understanding of that quality.⁶

To attribute to God susceptibility to suffering is not to lower but to elevate our conception of his nature. An infinitude which rendered Him incapable of moral emotion, of pity, compassion, delight in the good and recoil from the evil that befell the objects of His love—this would be a spurious infinitude. To ascribe it to God would be to sacrifice moral expansion to a metaphysical figment.⁷

Upon the basis of this revelation Jesus was able to proclaim the possibility of a higher life for man in which natural ills lose their power or are transformed into agencies for good. Since the character of God, the infinite Reality, is most completely expressed in benevolence—a benevolence which involves suffering and self-sacrifice—it follows that the reality of man as a finite being is determined not by the length of natural existence or the amount of his physical energy but by the degree of his moral perfection. For it is through the exercise of moral capacities, through sympathy, love, and benevolence, that human life approaches most nearly the divine life and shares its eternal reality. Now man's existence as a natural being depends upon the preservation of his physical health and strength. Because pain and privation, disease and death, diminish and destroy these, the conditions of natural existence, they seem in the worst sense *evils*. But the same experiences of suffering may become factors in the highest moral achievement. For love and benevolence find most perfect expression in suffering and self-sacrifice. Pain undergone for the sake of another is the truest manifestation of sympathy and friendliness. Since man attains highest reality not through his physical power but by his moral achievement, such experiences do not diminish but increase the reality of those who endure them. Through them the sufferer is elevated into a higher mode of existence, the life of the "Kingdom," where he works in fellowship with God.

Thus Jesus could assert that pain and even death suffered in the discharge of duty or for the sake of others are not as they appear, destructive of life. Rather they are conditions of entrance into a higher and fuller life, the life eternal. In this way the ills undergone

⁶ Cf. also Nettleship's fragment on the Atonement, *Philosophical Lectures and Remains of Richard Lewis Nettleship*, Vol. I, p. 39.

⁷ Principal John Caird, *Fundamental Ideas of Christianity*, Vol. II, p. 144.

by those who devote themselves to the good of others are converted into means for good. For if one is devoted entirely to the welfare of his fellow-creatures a large part of the ills which he suffers will be incidental to this, his absorbing service. As to the other ills of nature which come upon a person quite independent of his vocation or manner of life—these can be received in a spirit which makes them equal to voluntary sacrifices. Remembering that it is for the good of humanity that natural laws should be inexorable, the individual may accept the painful consequences of this uniformity which happen to fall on him as a sacrifice which he is willing to make in the interest of an arrangement which conduces to the well-being of the whole human race.

Such is the Christian solution for the problem of natural evil. The difficulties of the problem are fully recognized. That evil is inherent in the constitution of the universe is not denied. But faith in the presence of a divine principle of goodness is at the same time preserved. The existence of irreconcilable difference and discord is freely admitted. But the existence of a unity in and through this difference is affirmed. How is it possible, we have asked, thus to reconcile opposites and find harmony in discord! Christianity accomplishes this feat by daring to attribute suffering and sacrifice to God. Thus difference is introduced into the very heart of unity and the unity is not destroyed but confirmed thereby. For it is the love of God, the All-Father, which is the ultimate principle of unity in the world, adjusting everything to its beneficent purposes. But this divine benevolence involves as its supreme expression, suffering and self-sacrifice in behalf of cherished creatures. Its power as a reconciling and unifying principle is not destroyed by this expression, however, but is raised to the highest level of efficiency. Since God's infinite reality is manifested most fully in suffering and self-sacrifice these painful experiences take on a new significance in the life of man. When such ills are undergone in the larger life of service they are signs of the highest moral achievement. In this climax of moral heroism human life resembles most closely the divine life and man gains fullest self-realization.

A new view of God and the world is suggested by the Christian revelation of a divine sacrifice. The existence of natural evil shows

that difference and opposition are inherent in the world. The good of humanity is gained, progress in universal evolution is purchased only at the expense of the individual. The parts are sacrificed to the whole. The Founder of Christianity did not deny that men as individuals must suffer. But he taught that God also suffers and has sacrificed himself for men. If the welfare of the whole is secured by the sacrifice of the parts, the welfare of the parts is in turn secured by the sacrifice of the whole. Through suffering the particular is identified with the universal; through suffering the universal identifies itself with the particular. Does not our knowledge of reality, imperfect as it is, warrant us in saying that only thus can complete organic unity be attained?

Several consequences of high importance for man's moral and religious life follow from the Christian conception of a self-sacrificing God.

1. *Man is reconciled to the universe* (or, if the expression be preferable) *is reconciled to God*. While it is not absolutely essential, perhaps, that man should "accept the universe" still it is a fact of considerable importance to religion that many men are provoked by the ills they suffer and see others suffer into an attitude of bitter hostility toward the universal order. The ills inflicted by natural forces seem so needless and wanton that men believe they are justified in feeling a deep indignation with the beings or powers that control these forces. They prefer to defy powers that perpetrate or permit such enormities and to be punished for their defiance rather than to win favor by submission and supplication. To spirits thus embittered by suffering an optimistic religion which is content with asserting that "God's in His heaven; all's right with the world" brings no relief. Such words seem the most hollow mockery. It is a plain fact that all is *not* right with the world. And a God who sits calm in his heaven undisturbed by the misery of the world is a monster of cruelty and not a merciful Father. To one who is torn by a great grief it brings little consolation to dilate upon the goodness of God. The sufferer sees slight evidence of his goodness. The Christian revelation of God, to the contrary, gives real help in cases like this and reconciles the individual with the universal order. No inclination is shown to overlook or minimize the sufferings of

man. But it is revealed that God also suffers and has sacrificed himself in carrying out his benevolent purposes for humanity. Thus there is given to man the best possible proof that his sufferings are not unnoticed by God and not unnecessary in the achievement of a greater good. For they are shared by God himself who can therefore sympathize with the pains and sorrows of his creatures. By these thoughts the heart of the individual is softened, his hostility is removed, and he becomes reconciled to endure whatever ills beset him in the discharge of his vocation in the world.

2. *Man is inspired to a life of service and self-sacrifice.* Jesus did not try to persuade men to undertake such a career by glossing over the hardships which are attendant upon it. In recommending a life of social service, he did not have recourse to easy generalities and assert that "the interests of the individual are identical with the good of society." He recognized that the difficulty in self-sacrifice lies just in the fact that the interest of the individual, as it appears to him, is not identical with the welfare of society. Hence the sacrifice of this interest, involving disappointment, suffering, and sometimes death, seems like a real destruction of the self, a surrender of personal existence. Jesus struck at the heart of this difficulty by his revelation of God. For while he did not question the genuineness of the sacrifice as far as the pain which it occasions is concerned, still he could show that it does not mean a sacrifice of personal reality by the individual. If suffering and self-sacrifice are crowning exhibitions of God's absolute reality such experiences cannot have a destructive effect on human personality. Rather, they are to be regarded as the conditions, hard it is true, which man must fulfil if he is to transcend his finitude and enter upon a larger and higher life which is his birthright as a child of God. Thus man is inspired to a life of self-sacrifice both by the divine example itself and by the assurance which it gives that, although his physical body may be shattered and natural existence may be shortened by the hardships of such service, he is, nevertheless, preserved and strengthened in his personal reality.

3. *Man is brought into personal union with God.* Pain and sorrow form so large a part of human existence that man can scarcely conceive of a life in which this feature is wholly absent. If God's life

is one of unbroken tranquillity and imperturbable happiness, it is so far removed from anything within the ken of human experience as to be practically incomprehensible to man. Moreover, the lack of sympathetic understanding which accompanies this conception of the divine life in the mind of man brings with it often a feeling of estrangement from God. For if God is responsible for the existence and condition of the world his undisturbed felicity in the presence of the great sufferings of his creatures seems hardly compatible with perfect kindness and mercy. But the Christian revelation suggests a totally different conception of the divine life. The discharge of duty, the expression of universal benevolence, is seen to involve the same experiences of suffering and self-sacrifice for God as for man. Such divinity man can understand and reverence. He may even feel a sense of comradeship with God when he labors and suffers in the interests of righteousness on earth. For thus he believes, God strives and suffers in the realization of his good purposes. Because he regards himself as a co-worker with God, sharing to a certain extent the divine experience, man thinks he can expect God's sympathy in time of trouble and his assistance in cases of need. Thus there is developed in the human soul a sense of close personal union with God which could be attained in no other way.

In conclusion mention may be made of certain metaphysical implications of the conception of God which we have been considering.

According to the Christian view man, through the sacrifice of his narrow, selfish interest, attains the larger "eternal" life. In other words man through the negation of his finitude attains infinity. This idea is familiar enough to one who is acquainted with the Hegelian philosophy. Through a dialectic process the contradiction between the individual's actual finitude and his potential infinity is resolved and he becomes really infinite. But while contradiction is removed in this process, negation remains as an essential element in the infinity that is achieved. That is, the larger life of spirit is what it is by virtue of its negative relation to the narrow selfish life which has been sacrificed. Now, if it is a true infinity which man thus realizes, it is evident that infinity contains necessarily a negative factor. We must admit that Infinite or Absolute Reality involves negation or "sacrifice" as an element essential to its nature. This logical demand

is fully met by the Christian view; for suffering and self-sacrifice are attributed to God himself. That recognition of an element of negation in the Absolute is not inconsistent with an idealism of the Hegelian type is clearly shown by Professor Bernard Bosanquet in a recent article.⁸ He proves on logical grounds that such a conception of the Absolute is more reasonable than that of Mr. Bradley and Professor McTaggart, who hold that absolute reality is without negation, difference, or relation. Professor Bosanquet states his position on this fundamental question as follows:

It is not an imperfection in the Supreme Being but an essential of his completeness that his nature summing up that of all reality should go out into its other to seek completion which in this case alone is absolutely found. The other in question can only be finite experience, and it is in and because of this and qualified by it that the divine nature maintains its infinity. And therefore it may be said that the general form of self-sacrifice—the fundamental logical structure of reality—is to be found here also, as it is everywhere. Not, of course, that the Infinite Being can lose or regain its perfection, but that the burden of the finite is inherently a part or rather an instrument of the self-completion of the infinite.⁹

⁸ Bosanquet, "Contradiction and Reality," *Mind*, January, 1906, p. 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.